

## The Resurrection of Edgar Saltus

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

SOMEWHERE in that Never-Never Land of Lord Dunsany there is a dusty road that stretches from Here to There. Along this road there trudges a figure. From the fact that his clothes are ragged, that his shoes are split and that his face is a gray dead heaven in which are imbedded two big, black stars weltering in light you may infer that he is a Poet.

A Lady, with a nimbus and a wand, incorporates herself out of thin air and walks beside the Superfluous Being. She is Fame. You may know that by the ironic grin in her eye.

They talk. And when Poet and Fame

talk the fairies and the demons listen and the solid old earth becomes such a garden as one sees in the Kingdoms of the Pipe.

But the upshot of the fable is (and I am not telling the story strictly on the level) that Fame gives the Poet a rendezvous—behind his tombstone one hundred years from date.

I recalled this story when, after looking through Carl Van Vechten's new and raucous book, *The Merry-Go-Round*—in which food is mixed with music, Mimi Agulias and Bernard Shaw trip the divine fantastic with Isadora Duncan, and James Huneker, Margaret Anglin and Johann Strauss take a flier at the Moulin de la Galette—I came across the name of Edgar Saltus. The second chapter of the book is devoted to him.

Saltus! Saltus! In what storied urn of memory reposed the word? In what sarcophagus of the past had I laid that verbal corpse? In what penetralia had I met the man with that name? At what Petronian feast of intellectuals had I clinked glasses with that being?

The superscription to the chapter is taken from an old ballad:

"Oh, no, we never mention him,  
His name is never heard!"

And as I turned page after page of Mr. Van Vechten's superb tribute to this Lost American the bandoliers slipped from a hidden face and the blood came surging back into petrified arteries, and eyes that I thought forever sealed opened wide, and great jewels fell from them that sang in words and formed themselves into daggers called epigrams. And Edgar Saltus rose out of his Pompeii. Well, as a matter of fact, he had only been summering in Oblivion.

There are three mysteries in American literature—the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe, the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce and the burial alive of Edgar Saltus. It is fairly certain that the latter was pretty comfortable in his grave; and it is still more certain that he begemmed his coffin with prose poems scratched into the pine wood with worms—worms, which are the epigrams of the sod. Then, too, without doubt, he had his Theophile Gautier with him, his Baudelaire, and was fed from the amphora of those two angelic ghosts, Leconte de Lisle and Villiers de l'Isle Adam.

Saltus still lives, though, in the flesh, and we lately read a tremendous prose smash at the Huns from his pen in the *Herald*. For here is an American that knows his language, that knows the creative and mystical power of words, that knows the phrase that kills and the sentence that is winged. As exotic as Poe and Lafcadio Hearn, his books should be called *Pomp and Purple*.

A lyrical intellect, an implacable pessimist, a sublime snob, he stands aloof and alone in his work. His contempt and disdain of "merely human" things is beautiful. It is a gesture toward the Infinite. This accounts for his unpopularity. He will have none of the mob. The sweat of everyday life to him is just sweat. The life of the poor is not a drama; it is a disease. The poor, the weary laden and the heartbroken exist no more for him than they did for Emerson. Whatever is not genius is dross. Whatever is beautiful is right. All life aspires to fiction. Humor is an attribute of God. Life itself is the conundrum of a jester.

His books take apart the mechanism of the quick. When he wrote *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* he was crowned by some one as "the Prose Laureate of Pessimism." All is illusion in the worst possible words—"so let us live in Paris." The characters in his novels of New York life moves like hallucinated automatons. There is a heroine in each book—Maya, the Hindu Goddess of Illusion. There is a hero in each book—Mephistopheles, Saltus is so great that he is unpleasant. He is as unwholesome as truth. He sees so far that his brain cells must be made up of telescopes that gods in the Fourth Dimension use to study the humans in the Fifth Dimension. He is as uncanny as the thought of immortality. And above all his work hangs the irony of Brahma.

His *Tristram Varicle* is the greatest novel that ever came from the pen of an American—a fable, a philosophy and an enormous chunk of life. You cannot buy it for love nor war stamps. It is a tale of the pursuit of the Ideal by Man—and the end is the badly lighted police room in the Tenderloin police station.

He is on intimate terms with the gods, and pals with the predestined criminals of all time—from Cain to the Borgias. He plays hide and seek with Nero, Tiberius and the Kaiser—he wrote this in 1906 in a chapter on hyenas (the hyenas are Ca-

ligate, Attila, Tamerlane, Ivan the Terrible & Co.).

"... The German Kaiser. Not long since somebody or other diagnosed in him the habitual criminal. We doubt that he is that. But we suspect that, were it not for the press, he would show more of the primitive man than he has thus far thought judicious." Coming Louvains cast their Saltuses before.

But it is because of his style that he will live. He has said nothing new—because there is nothing new to be said. His brain is as old as Buddha's or that of the author of *Ecclesiastes*. His style is the measured tread of his wisdom. His sentences are cut from the jewelled heavens

in which he lives. His words drip into the neat paragraph as from pools of images. His crescendoes pierce in the air, and the flowers remain there, frozen gardens. One feels him moving behind the page like a pontiff behind a huge, gently swaying curtain. There is no creak, no noise, no jolt. He passes imperceptibly from Zeus to Brahma, from Brahma to Amon Ra like a sun walker shod in ether.

Neither Moliere nor Balzac sat in the Academy. Edgar Saltus must remain our forty-first Immortal.

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